Linguistic migrations: teaching English in multicultural contexts

Linguistic Migrations: Teaching English in Multicultural Contexts

Esterino Adami
University of Turin (Italy)

The impact of massive social phenomena like globalisation and migration plays a crucial role in the pedagogic context, which nowadays may also result in the variegated composition of learning environments, quite often represented by multiethnic classes. Since economies and societies need to build the capacity required to operate in a globalised world, education systems are in a state of rapid change and extensive curriculum reforms are taking place. In particular, the multiple role of English, considered not "merely" as a foreign language, seems to emerge as a key notion, and this new scenario evokes the profound changes that concern the people who learn English, their motives for learning it and their communicative needs as learners. Alongside with the "traditional" didactic concepts of approach, method, procedure and technique, the issue of teaching English in multicultural environments should also include a series of reflections and considerations about the nature and position of the language, the different typologies of students, as well as the political and social implications in the pedagogic activity. Therefore, emphasis ought to shift from "what" to teach to "how" to teach, on the basis of a holistic approach that considers the whole personality and idiosyncratic features of the learner. I shall deal with certain aspects of the global dimension of English language teaching against the backdrop of the migratory transformations that deeply affect societies and countries, focusing in particular upon English in the contemporary mixed multiethnic class.

Here I am also concerned with a specific element embedded within the spread of English as a Global Language (EGL), and its didactic practices, namely the implicit target of transnational or cosmopolitan citizenship, a significant element and condition that currently surface the pedagogic implementation of linguistic teaching, especially in the multiethnic classroom, where identities and histories are juxtaposed in an effort of formal mediation. Guilherme seems to extend the potentiality of the educational core of ELT and holds that "considering that in most cases English is a foreign

and dominant language, although still related to the power-negotiation process between languages, critical English teaching/learning nowadays cannot avoid reflecting on identity and citizenship discussions as related to regional, national and transnational spheres" (2007: 74). In addition, the ideological implications of ELT as a hegemonic tool of power assertion on the world scale are today challenged and reshaped by efforts of interdisciplinary rethinking, in particular via the promotion and realisation of projects concerning international partnership and cooperation, for which English is expected to function as a "neutral" code. The spread of EGL (or ELF) should allow, at least theoretically, more and more people to access education and resources. This vision may be too unrealistically positive, and teachers and language specialists have to extend the focus of their actions and research in order to implement the possible educational values of ELT.

Let us examine the scope of English language teaching, a kind of "world educational project" (to borrow Graddol's definition), whose contours still appear controversial. Traditionally, ELT refers to two prestigious varieties, namely British English (Received Pronunciation) and General American (GA), but, for various reasons, trends show that these models, with their emphasis on the notion, or "myth", of the native speaker, gradually seem no longer to provide the best goals for L2 learners. As Kramsch remarks, "the 'native speaker' of linguists and language teachers is in fact an abstraction based on arbitrarily selected features of pronunciation, grammar and lexicon, as well as on stereotypical features of appearance and demeanor" (1998: 79-80). As a matter of fact, the notion itself of "native speaker" nowadays seems to be more problematic than precise, given the emergence of different varieties of English in the world (e.g. Australian English, Indian English, South African English), and although the tests which are taken most seriously measure competence in relation to native speaker norms (let us think about the Cambridge Exams, for instance), learners may show different attitudes to the language. Perhaps they do not wish to sound like native speakers but prefer to consider - and acquire - English as an International Language (EIL) or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). People who learn English could reject typical language courses drawing on a lot of UK/USA culture and with language samples mainly using one of the two varieties since they may be interested in mastering the language for international communication. It is a rather multifaceted arena, in which people have to negotiate their different social positions and sociolinguistic attitudes, switching from their mother tongue to EIL. What emerges is a conflict between mutual intelligibility and identity markers: people aim to communicate with the world through English but at the same time they may wish to maintain their cultural aspects, like accents, lexis or other peculiar traits.

Indeed, when we investigate the context of English language teaching/learning, it is necessary to examine the ideological implications underlying its global dimensions, since English

still has connections with the postcolonial discourses that continue to reproduce colonial and exonormative perspectives. An example we can refer to is the textbook *The Culture Puzzle* (1987), which in the authors' intention is "designed for use in English language classes both in the U.S. and abroad". In spite of the promising subtitle (which reads *Cross-cultural Communication for English as a Second Language*), the writers specify in their Preface that "by the time students finish the text, they will have a basic understanding of commonly held American culture", and therefore they explicitly show their orientation towards native models of language and culture. However, there are some attempts to expand the book's structures and materials so as to span over "differences in communication styles across cultures". To challenge the monolithic, ethnocentric approaches with methodologies and materials promoted by the inner circle countries (i.e. territories with English as a First Language, the UK and the USA *in primis*), scholars like Braj Kachru and Peter Strevens suggest a paradigm shift in the teaching and testing of English, to reflect that the majority of people who learn and use English today are not native speakers and do not even use it to communicate with them. Moreover, especially in multiethnic classes, questions of cultural identity should be addressed properly, in an effort to mediate between conflicting interpretations of human experience, or to avoid ethnocentric perspectives. The broad scope of the teaching practice in this case should enable learners not only to the master communicative competences, but also allow them to acquire a critical vision, viz. a cosmopolitan or intercultural education and citizenship.

If the model of English as a Lingua Franca or English as an Global Language is adopted, then, intercultural competence, conceived as the apt combination of linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competences, must be a primary objective on the agenda. Therefore, some linguists and psychologists prefer the notion of "intercultural speaker", instead of "native speaker", is based not on imitation but rather on comparison. In particular, Byram argues that in the foreign language classroom, due to the concomitance of many social and cultural aspects and characteristics, it would be appropriate to introduce the model of the intercultural speaker, namely the subject able to employ at least "two broad and related categories: first, skills of interpretation and establishing relationships between aspects of the two cultures; second, skills of discovery and interactions" (1997: 33). Another proposal, formulated by Patrick Boylan, is centred on the model of the 'transcultured' speaker, according to a pedagogic vision that aptly matches together the values of both language and culture. In his opinion, special emphasis should be devoted to the student's personal sphere as well as the volitional, affective and cognitive components of knowledge: "language learners who undergo a 'transformation of the self' do not loose their identity: indeed, by being able to express themselves with feeling from within the new culture, they are able to make themselves understood far less ambiguously than if their knowledge of the target language/culture

had been essentially cognitive. From this privileged vantage point, they are better able to appraise – critically – both their native and their acquired cultures" (Boylan in Bondi 2005: 65).

Thus, primary linguistic skills are not sufficient to interact successfully but there is a need for integrative skills, such as paraphrasing, summarising, note-taking. In the area of interlinguistic skills, in particular, translation operates as a paramount strategy, in both its written and impromptu forms, bearing in mind the relevant cultural component implied in the object of the translating process. Hence, "the new trends in translation theory and practice ultimately appear to be not only involved in an inter-exchange with issues of intercultural and cross-cultural communication but are, in most cases, concerned with matters regarding the target readership, is culture and language at a synchronic level, i.e. according to the socio-cultural and political factors at a particular point in time" (Rizzo 2007: 62). In the multiethnic class, the activity of translation constitutes a vital resource of mediation, intermixing the different languages and fostering a climate of mutual identification and respect.

The language policies and educational practices of multilingual territories like Singapore can be observed as innovative experiments of English teaching in multicultural settings. This theme thus focuses on methods and cultures, and we ought to remember that our attitudes to the language and the way it is taught mirror cultural biases and beliefs about how we should communicate and how we should educate each other. Where there are differing beliefs or expectations, the teaching-learning experience can become problematic, and it is worth remembering that many approaches and teaching methods are based on a very "western" idea of what constitutes "good" learning and, consequently, in mixed classes and groups of learners this attitude may generate tension and misunderstanding (Harmer 2001).

As a matter of fact, we cannot ignore the influence of multiculturalism on the teaching profession, and we should not consider it just in terms of encounter between different language and culture systems, but rather of encounter between individuals with their own meanings and cultural references. Within an intercultural approach, therefore prominence is laid upon the ability to gather knowledge about another culture, as well as the skills of empathy, management of anxiety and adaptability (including the attitudes and skills of discovery, interpretation and relating). It is also important to distinguish this kind of engagement with otherness from the "tourist" approach of collecting experiences of the "exotic" (Byram 1997, Martin *et alii* 2001). In fact, when Edelhoff affirms, "intercultural learning is understanding" (2006: 117), she refers to a wide cognitive process of decoding signs and behaviours, combined with the capacity to interact. This becomes particularly salient in the circumstances of intercultural settings, where the paradigms of closeness and distance between participants in communicative acts have to be interpreted not only as spatial (geographical)

terms, but especially as cultural and social terms. We should bear in mind that reaching mutual understanding is a kind of 'joint production' (Ponterotto in Bondi 2005).

In the outer circle countries, where English is taught as a foreign or international language, the case of multicultural classes, characterised by the presence of children from migrant families, is very common, and here teachers have to take into account not only elements like the personalities of the students, the issue of multiple intelligences (according to the model of Howard Gardner), their motivation factors (and implicitly all the affective filters slowing or preventing the learning process), learning styles and socio-cultural backgrounds, but also the distance between the mother tongue of the students (their L1), the English language used during the lesson activities as well as the official language of the host country (their "new" L2). Equally significant and worth noticing are the resources available to students outside the classroom - which scholars tend to define either as "inter-subjective", for example parents, friends or recreational contexts, or "subjective", like dictionaries, libraries and so forth - the expectations deriving from the migratory process (social collocation, economic issues), or previous learning experiences in their homelands (type of schools in the migrants' native countries).

Moreover, teachers and pedagogues should also bear in mind the wide scope of the educational relationship as well as the psychological conflicts bound to the migrant's condition. Migrant subjects (children in particular) may have experienced different teaching/learning contexts and roles, and this type of situation can be further problematic owing to the identity negotiations that crucially characterise the burden of diaspora. As Martin and Nakayama argue, "identities do not develop as a smooth process and are created through communication with others. Also, they are multiple and develop in different ways in different cultures. They are dynamic and may be created for us by existing social contexts and structures and in relation to group membership" (2001: 93). Therefore, in the multiethnic class a humanistic approach must take into account the wealth of personal, social and cultural elements that make up the uniqueness of every single learner/student, with the ultimate objective to enhance their developing interlanguage and promote effective communicative success.

Let me briefly quote a case regarding a survey carried on in secondary schools in Milan, in northern Italy (Sekulić and Trovato 2006). This study focused on the perceptions of teachers with regard to the growing presence of migrant students (born within migrant families living in Italy) and was mainly addressed to technical or vocational schools, where the pragmatic expectations of the parents are aimed at finding a job for their children, after completing the compulsory educational path. In such situations, English is seen as a third language, since students have to employ and negotiate between both their original L1 (typically in the domain of family life) and their "acquired"

L2 (Italian, in this case) for their practical (utilitarian) needs. In general, these students seem to find more difficulties with scientific subjects, but they often seem to obtain better results with foreign languages. To a certain extent, their peculiar diasporic condition appears to bring them to reflect autonomously on some linguistic strategies – the ones they often use – such as code-mixing, code-switching and lexical borrowing. To a certain degree, this act of language awareness affects positively their language learning/acquisition.

Given such intricate scenario, it is clear that teachers are not likely to find a univocal didactic solution to manage multicultural classes, but they should recognise a need for a personal methodology which, starting from precise methodological indications (for instance, a humanistic, affective and communicative approach), will have to be adapted and built bearing in mind the operational context. It is a creative effort of mediation between the set syllabus, the psychological dimension of the students and the environmental characteristics. Thus, the starting point should not be the theory, the method, the technique but rather the class perceived as a network of relations and individuals within an unthreatening environment (Caon 2005).

As a consequence, teachers ought to be oriented towards an active, experiential and experimental teaching activity in order to deal with the different affective, emotional, interpersonal, sensorial, cognitive characteristics of the students, pointing gout the potentialities of both the individual and the group-class in the phase of knowledge building and management, coordinating the different types of savoir. Simultaneously, teachers and educators should be aware of the social dimensions of the pedagogic context, and encourage pupils to develop their linguistic, cognitive, social, cultural and intercultural competences. This type of teaching, within an intercultural perspective, deems not only the "products", namely the linguistic goals achieved by the students, but also the "processes" through which students learn and approach the different topics. Consequently, the levels of motivation and self-reflection will increase and lead to student autonomy, emphasising the whole process of language acquisition. Methods and procedures can range from peer groups to self-learning (for instance with materials like CD-ROMs) or the creation of interdisciplinary programmes. In so doing, the intercultural approach expresses, to a certain degree, its closeness to the methodology of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and its learner-centred focus, advocated by many scholars and linguists like Brumfit or Prabhu. Communicative, and intercultural, activities are based upon a desire to communicate, with special attention to the content and not the form, the varieties of the language and the communicative purpose. However, this kind of approach, with emphasis on the exposure to language in use and the importance given to linguistic functions, is sometimes criticised inasmuch as it highlights fluency excessively, and does not concern proper formal accuracy.

Both productive and receptive skills (respectively speaking/writing and reading/listening) have to be trained, but rather than drilling and repetition (that is, old-fashioned the audio-lingual method; see Derrick 1996) that usually make the class a "dull" place, for instance, teachers could use task-based activities, and then try to enhance attitudes like curiosity and openness in a measured and controlled way. We certainly should not condemn or abolish learning by rote *in toto*, as it can be effective, but it is essential that it is included within a balanced methodological approach, benefiting from several didactic strategies. Teaching in a multicultural perspective may also draw from the Humanist Approach (let us think about Abraham Maslow) by considering the learner's feelings as important as their mental or cognitive abilities. Within such perspective (elaborated by Carl Rogers), the affective filters, that is the mental mechanisms that block that input from being absorbed and processed, students need to feel that what they learn is personally relevant to them. thus, they have to be encouraged to speak about themselves, in terms of personal identity, emotions and self-knowledge, although too personal or intimate questions have to be avoided whilst the teacher has to monitor the class constantly to mediate cultural, social, religious or personal conflicts. In multilingual contexts – India, for example – the teacher becomes the facilitator of the communicative processes, as well as the needs analyst, the counsellor and the process manager. What emerges is a multiple role for the teacher, having to face radical transformations in the fast-changing global world/classroom.

Furthermore, it is significant to consider that the attention and time dedicated to migrant students is not of detriment to the rest of the class, but rather they can represent a fruitful chance to explore more complex themes, with their cognitive, linguistic, social and cultural implications. In a multicultural approach, it is possible to promote the notion of difference considered not as a limiting threat, but as source of new reciprocal learning. Let us briefly expand our issue: if we compare the dynamics of speakers' interactions in multiethnic settings with conversations held between native and non-native speakers, interesting considerations arise. Research shows that typically native speakers tend to dominate conversations involving non-natives and natives, but recently scholars have noticed that this does not always occur, and that possibly non-native speakers can perform a central role in speech acts. Therefore, other variables affect communication when participants vie for the floor and the cultural weight in verbal interaction is prominent. As Ponterotto suggests, "negative stereotypes of cultural differences, including national, ethnic and gender-related attributions, will ghost, so-to-speak, interlocutors' cognitive representations and discourse strategies" (in Bondi 2005: 262).

In pedagogic multiethnic and mixed contexts, teachers cannot run these risks and have to elaborate methods for managing cultural conflicts and activate cooperation in the participant

communication in order to negotiate a common breakdown. As teachers and language specialists, we also need to balance the interests of individuals against what is good for the group and to be aware of certain individual traits when putting students into pairs or groups. Teachers need to recognise those students who need more personal attention than others, and those who need different kinds of explanations and practices of language. A personalised type of teaching, integrated within a wider didactic plan, can have a positive impact on the learning process and result.

Finally, it is important to underscore that teaching and learning constitute a contract between two parties for which they both need to agree the terms. It is not a one-sided affair. Teachers need to understand students' needs and expectations just as much as they are ready to adapt or change their own methodological beliefs. However, this does not necessarily mean that they just have to abandon their own theories because the students are not used to what their teachers want to do. Instead, some kind of accommodation has to be reached between what the two parties want and expect. It may mean, for example, starting gradually rather than with an instantaneous change. If students are not used to giving instant opinions in class, for example, teachers can introduce the procedure gradually. Adopting accommodation between two cultures (which may involve moderating beliefs, making comparisons) is part of what all teachers are required to do. In conclusion, we should all subscribe to Scrivener's remark: "as language teachers, we are privileged to work with a vital and fascinating subject matter. Language is the way we express our very being. It is the way we come to terms with the world. It is the way we make our understanding of life concrete. It is the way we make contract with other human beings" (2005: 380). Within a multicultural perspective, the sociolinguistic and didactic context becomes even more challenging, but at the same time extremely rewarding if we project the value of education onto the future.

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